

**Remarks as prepared for delivery by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the
National Hurricane Conference**

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(Remarks as Prepared)

Thank you for that warm welcome. I appreciate the opportunity to come down to Florida today to speak with emergency managers and state and local officials about our priorities as we prepare for the 2006 hurricane season.

Of course, Florida is certainly an appropriate place to hold this discussion. I believe this state has the dubious honor of being struck by more hurricanes than any other state in the country.

As we know, the major threats we face – whether a hurricane, a terrorist incident, or pandemic flu – are not just federal concerns; they are national concerns that require a national strategy and a national response effectively integrating all levels of government.

Today, we are here to talk about the threat of hurricanes. We have very specific goals and a very clear timeline as we approach June 1. We need to develop a clear understanding of our roles and responsibilities, our current capabilities, and the steps we need to take to be as prepared as we possibly can in the event we do face a significant hurricane.

Now, there are some fundamental principles we follow at DHS with respect to emergency management. These are principles grounded in the wisdom of the emergency management community and those who have spent entire careers dealing with hurricanes and other kinds of disasters.

First and foremost, we recognize that state and local governments are the primary first responders in a disaster. And there is a good reason for this. Disasters, by their very nature, occur locally – in communities far removed from federal assets. State and local responders are the first on the scene and are most attuned to the needs and concerns of local populations. This fundamental fact is not going to change and the Federal government has no interest in superseding your authority to protect and serve your citizens.

But in an utterly catastrophic disaster like Katrina, the Federal government does have a role to play and a clear responsibility to support state and local response when your ability to deal with a disaster has been clearly overwhelmed.

We have a unique set of capabilities we can bring to bear during a crisis. We certainly saw many of these capabilities on display during the response to Katrina. The Coast Guard rescued more than 33,000 people from flooded streets and rooftops – six times the rescues in all of 2004. FEMA also rescued 6,500 people, in partnership with state and local responders. Because of these two Homeland Security agencies, more than 40,000 people are alive today.

Now, I know the people in this room understand how these lines of responsibility are divided among federal, state and local jurisdictions. But for the benefit of the public and the media, I'd like to talk for a minute about the standard framework for managing a disaster – because the fact of the matter is that we may need to do some things differently this year, particularly in the Gulf.

By law, local government is responsible for providing for the safety and security of citizens in advance of a hurricane. That means they are in charge of developing emergency plans, determining evacuation routes, providing public transportation for those who can't self-evacuate, and setting up and stocking local shelters with relief supplies.

State government is responsible for mobilizing the National Guard, pre-positioning certain assets and supplies, and setting up the state's emergency management functions. They are also in charge of requests for Federal support through the formal disaster declaration process.

The Federal government is responsible for meeting those requests from the state – both during the disaster and in its aftermath. As we saw during Katrina, that includes logistical support for search and rescue, providing food, water and ice, establishing disaster centers and processing federal disaster claims, and participating in short- and long-term public works projects – such as debris removal and infrastructure rebuilding.

This is the basic framework. Now, as we know, we face some unique challenges this year in the Gulf. Parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama are still being rebuilt from Katrina and many communities are essentially in a transitional state.

As a result, we may need to take some steps outside the traditional emergency response framework to make sure those in the Gulf are prepared for hurricane season – such as conducting joint planning in an excruciating level of detail that most state and local governments wouldn't want the federal government to do.

We're going to push those states to reach out to citizens to make sure there is a very clear understanding of the need to have effective evacuation plans and emergency supplies. I look forward meeting with the Governors and other state and local officials and emergency managers in the Gulf to assess the level of readiness and determine the steps we need to take by June 1.

In addition, over the next sixty days, the Department will sponsor five regional Hurricane Preparedness Exercises in the Gulf – to test and validate improvements made to hurricane plans since Katrina and Rita, and to identify areas where we may need to redouble our efforts.

We also want to continue to draw upon the wealth of experience of states like Florida – which has extensive experience dealing with hurricanes. For example, many in this state have invested in safeguards to protect against the wind and flooding that comes with a hurricane – down to the level of designing buildings to be more wind resistant or putting a special kind of rooftop on homes.

That's not to say everything always goes right in Florida or in other states. Every storm is different, just as every state is different. But despite these inherent challenges, we will be better prepared at the federal level for hurricane season this year than we were last year – and perhaps more prepared than we've ever been – because we have taken substantial steps over the past weeks and months to boost capabilities in a number of areas.

Last week, I announced a new senior leadership team at FEMA, which – pending Senate confirmation – will be led by Chief David Paulison, whom many of you know in these parts. Chief Paulison took the reins at FEMA last September after Katrina struck. He immediately took charge and prepared FEMA for Hurricane Rita, and then Hurricane Wilma.

Since that time he has overseen 25 disaster declarations. He is someone with more than 30 years of disaster management experience – first as a rescue fire fighter and ultimately as Miami-Dade Fire Chief. He's a veteran emergency manager and truly understands the needs and concerns of state and local governments.

We also have appointed a seasoned, three-star Coast Guard Admiral – Harvey Johnson – to serve as the Deputy Director at FEMA. He brings a tremendous amount of operational experience to FEMA, having responded to Katrina and leading all Coast Guard operations in the Pacific region. Joining him will be new directors for operations and disaster mitigation, and we'll soon be appointing a chief logistics officer. This new leadership team has more than 100 years of experience in public service, emergency management, and state and local government.

As you know, we also have brought on-board a veteran state emergency manager with 30 years of experience – George Foresman – to integrate the Department's preparedness functions and capabilities under our new Preparedness Directorate.

Of course, the Preparedness Directorate is conducting a review of the emergency plans of all 50 states and 75 major urban areas, which is something President Bush mandated after Katrina.

The initial report based on state self-assessments in February showed a mixed bag of capabilities and planning. We expect to issue a report on June 1 that further assesses the capabilities of states, pinpoints shortfalls, and makes specific recommendations to help us achieve a better state of preparedness by this summer.

There are also some long-term policy issues that will need to be addressed, quite frankly, across all levels of government. Both the House of Representatives and the White House have released after-action reports on Katrina with a combined 215 recommendations, and the Senate will be following suit in the coming weeks. But as any emergency manager knows, we don't have the luxury of time to wait for every review to be finalized before we take action.

We have done our own soul searching at DHS to learn the lessons of Katrina and to make needed changes – in particular, changes to FEMA.

Now, I'd like to make something crystal clear. Our goal is to make FEMA stronger and provide FEMA with the 21st century tools and resources it needs to meet the challenges of today. For this reason, the President has requested a 10 percent increase in FEMA's budget for 2007.

Before hurricane season, we're also going to strengthen FEMA across a number of areas, including logistics, claims processing for disaster victims, debris removal, procurement, and emergency communications. Let me briefly address three of these areas in more detail – logistics, debris removal, and contracting.

While FEMA delivered record numbers of supplies and commodities during Katrina, its outdated logistics management and fulfillment systems were simply not adequate for this truly catastrophic storm.

FEMA is now implementing a new commodity tracking initiative that will enable real-time visibility into the movement and delivery of supplies and will allow FEMA to better manage and track inventories.

In March, FEMA also signed an agreement with the Defense Logistics Agency to leverage prime vendor contracts. This will ensure a more rapid and reliable movement of available stockpiles of emergency meals, water, tarps, medical equipment and essential pharmaceuticals. In the

future, FEMA will also require more detailed information from states about staging areas and points of distribution so that supplies will get to the places of greatest need in a timely fashion.

Over the past few months, I've also heard a lot of complaints from states and local governments about the red tape involved in the debris removal program. Now, the Army Corps of Engineers has unique capabilities to break through debris and open critical roadways and waterways in emergency situations.

The Corps can play and will continue to play a critical role in the initial response to a disaster. At the same time, we recognize the Army Corps has never been designed to be the solution for all of a community's long-term debris removal and rebuilding needs.

This year our approach will be to empower local communities to contract with local vendors, rather than using the Army Corps as a middleman. Local communities will still have to keep records and document expenses in the interest of accountability. We can't eliminate all paperwork, but we will provide more flexibility up front.

As part of that process, we're also going to look at reimbursing states for certain costs associated with managing debris removal contractors, such as evaluating proposals, awarding contracts, and conducting oversight. The reimbursement process needs to be efficient and not bogged down in bureaucracy. At the same time, we need to make sure we're protecting against waste and fraud.

Of course, the contracting process must be fair and favorable to local vendors. To be sure, there are times when major companies need to be brought in on short notice to address immediate needs that local vendors cannot handle. But we want to engage local vendors when we can and in a way that ensures fair market value for services.

As you may know, the four major reconstruction contracts that were awarded in the aftermath of Katrina will expire in July. Although some work will still be ongoing under those contracts – and FEMA has successfully bid 36 regional contracts focused on local vendors and small businesses – we now have an opportunity to competitively bid replacement contracts, including those for so-called “haul and install” services for manufactured homes and trailers.

FEMA expects to announce a Request for Proposals in the near future, with the goal of having competitively bid major contracts already in place for future disasters. This will allow FEMA to have a pool of vendors lined up before a disaster strikes and give us a quick trigger to activate those contracts and help those in need.

Of course, another major area of focus has been federal coordination during emergencies, in particular between DHS and the Department of Defense.

In that regard, we have been working with DOD to position a Defense Coordinating Officer in all 10 FEMA regions year-round. That means a DOD person will literally be in the room with our FEMA personnel and we will have the benefit of the military's planning capabilities and experience to guide our own thinking and preparedness efforts.

We're also going to clarify the different roles and relationships of the Principal Federal Official and Federal Coordinating Official. In fact, we are taking the unprecedented step of pre-designating these officials for the upcoming hurricane season with personnel from FEMA, the Coast Guard, and other DHS agencies. This will give state and local officials a chance to plan, train, and exercise with their federal counterparts before disaster strikes.

One thing that is abundantly clear from our experience during Katrina is that the federal government must function as an integrated and unified whole during catastrophes. For that reason, the worst thing that we could do would be to break apart our emergency management functions by taking FEMA out of DHS.

Many of the shortcomings in our response to Katrina were actually a result of a failure to sufficiently integrate FEMA into DHS. I know some former FEMA leaders and others have expressed a desire to remove FEMA from DHS and make it a stand-alone agency in the hopes of creating some mythical agency of the past. This is exactly the wrong approach for several reasons.

First, disasters won't always come with warning and won't always be labeled "natural disaster" or "terrorism." Things will be even more confused if we pull FEMA out of DHS and have separate agencies with overlapping or even competing functions.

Second, FEMA needs to have joint planning and joint operational capabilities. Separating FEMA from DHS would mean separating it from the Coast Guard, our new Preparedness Directorate, and many other DHS assets and components that FEMA would need to work with during a major disaster.

FEMA would also lose the benefit of key planning initiatives and activities at DHS. For example, you might recall that the Hurricane Pam exercise took place only after FEMA became part of DHS. There was no New Orleans hurricane plan back in the so-called "golden years" of FEMA.

Finally, if FEMA's inclusion in DHS was the problem, as some have claimed, how do you explain the performance of the Coast Guard or TSA or CBP or ICE? Other DHS components have been praised for their efforts during Katrina, especially the Coast Guard. They chose to pursue a path of integration while some of those formerly in FEMA chose to go outside the system that Congress and the Administration created. By separating FEMA from DHS, we would shortchange the potential of integrating these efforts.

The bottom line is this: FEMA did not fail because of where it lies on the organizational chart. We can focus on constantly rearranging the deck chairs of government every year or two and guarantee that we will fail, or we can focus on what needs to be done to fix problems. I am focused on fixing the problems, just as I know everyone here today is focused on fixing problems within your own states and communities.

But at the end of the day, we know the responsibility for emergency preparedness isn't solely in the hands of government. Individual citizens also have an important role to play. Indeed, I believe they have a civic responsibility to take some sensible steps to get ready for hurricane season, especially if they are able-bodied.

Any individual who is able to evacuate or to rescue himself from danger has a moral responsibility to do so. As you well know, if a person does not take responsibility for his own safety, that individual is basically forcing us to divert our resources away from the person who truly needs the assistance.

We've developed a variety of tools at DHS to encourage individuals and communities to get involved in preparedness efforts and take some responsibility for their own safety. These efforts include the Ready Campaign, Citizen Corps, and National Preparedness Month.

People should be prepared to sustain themselves for up to 72 hours after a disaster – because first responders might not be able to reach every single person within the first day. That means individuals – especially those in the Gulf states – need to have an emergency plan and an emergency kit with adequate supplies of food, water, and other essentials like a flashlight, first-aid, and medicines. I encourage everyone to visit www.ready.gov for more information, and I encourage states and local communities to develop similar citizen preparedness programs.

There has certainly been a lot of focus on emergency management over the past year by the public and the media. Not all of that discussion has benefited from the context or experience held by those of you in this room.

Disaster management is not like an episode of the TV show “24” – where everything is solved within a day. It is tough, hard work. There are always unanticipated needs and consequences. And there are always going to be parts of the country where there are increased risks.

We may not experience another hurricane on June 1. But if we do, we want to do everything in our power to ensure we’re as ready as we can be. That means having effective emergency and evacuation plans in place. It means planning and preparing ahead of the storm, not improvising a response after it occurs. And it means continuing to work together to get the most accurate and realistic assessment of our capabilities and then taking steps to strengthen and refine those capabilities over the next two months.

You are essential partners in this effort. I look forward to working with you to meet those goals in the days and weeks ahead and to expand our critical partnership. I appreciate the participation of everyone here today, and I appreciate your ongoing support and collaboration. Thank you.